

Queer Performance

A round table discussion between solo artists whose work traverses performance art, cabaret and drag

This event took place at Central School of Speech & Drama on 2 June, 2010

Panel:

Dusty Limits (DL), performer

Holestar (H), performer

David Hoyle (DH), performer

Chair:

Dr Stephen Farrier (SF), Senior Lecturer and Course Leader, Drama,
Applied Theatre and Education, Central School of Speech & Drama

Steve Farrier: Tonight we're privileged to have with us some of the luminaries of queer performance culture. Tonight's event will have a slightly different rhythm – instead of the usual format of guests delivering a paper, we've decided to make tonight a bit more informal. A bit more *Parkinson*.

The three performers tonight occupy slightly different spaces in the queer performance scene, but are connected through their practice, particularly in their relation to art practice and their relationship with audiences. They're all consummate performers who have chosen to do some of their work in an area of the performance landscape that's popular, that offers access to the masses, not in terms of number but in terms of form. It's clear they have an impact on a burgeoning generation of other artists, judging by the frequent references to them in my students' essays.

Dusty Limits is an award winning performer on the cabaret scene of whom *Time Out* said: 'If Weimar Cabaret could walk and talk, we'd be calling it Dusty Limits.' He's committed to the Edinburgh Fringe, works as an actor, director, vocal coach, lecturer and is an exponent of the German Cabaret form; would you say that's right?

Next is Holestar. Or Julie?

Holestar: Holestar is for the wigs at home, so Julie.

SF: So this is Julie. She's known as Holestar at home, or 'the tranny with the fanny'. She performs all across Europe, for clubs, at art galleries and in pop videos. She trained as a photographer and artist and is now a club promoter who works across the world. She spent some time in the army as well, which hopefully we'll get to talk about.

Finally, this of course is David Hoyle, a key performer on the queer scene. He's appeared on stage, film, television, radio. He first came to my attention as 'the Divine David' who had his own Channel 4 TV programme, and whom he then 'murdered' in 2000 on Streatham ice rink. I still I hear people talking about that performance – brilliant! Again he's performed the world over and on some of the most influential London stages. He's a spokesperson for the Avant Garde Alliance Party and can usually be caught at the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, where people queue around the block to see him.

I'm going to suggest what we do this evening. I say 'suggest'; I mean 'command'! If we talk for about 45 minutes and then we'll grab a glass of wine and then we'll take questions from the floor and we'll finish about 7.30pm.

So I will start off with a question about how you got where you are – less in terms of career moves and more in terms of how your work has evolved to what it is now. Who wants to take that first?

DL: Oh no! That's such a hard question! I didn't have any career moves, everything I did kind of happened sideways and by accident really, not because I'm a great believer in serendipity but I'm just really disorganised and don't have a 'game plan'. I started acting at university, really enjoyed that, then began training my voice, enjoyed that more, then started doing live cabaret. But I'm quite old fashioned, you know – show tunes and jazz standards, all that kind of stuff. Then I did a production of *The Threepenny Opera*, which is where I discovered the music of Kurt Weill, and then off the back of that got really interested in German cabaret and the history of cabaret and started working as a cabaret singer. This is all far longer ago than I want to think about, probably 15, 16 years... 17...

I didn't really connect politics to what I was doing in a specific way, but the more I did solo cabaret work, the more I got interested in it. And being interested in the history, and being a gay man working in Brisbane, Australia, it is inevitable that you import some of that political sensibility into what you're doing. So when I moved to London, that just became part of the parcel of what I did, not because I was making any conscious decision to be assertively political or to push the boundaries of British culture. It was small things, like if I sang a love song I would sing with a male pronoun, just because it seemed more natural and more correct to do that. I guess in a back-to-front way that is a political act, but I just thought of it as being more artistically true.

Then the longer I lived in London, the more I got involved in a much bigger cabaret scene, a much more diverse cabaret scene that connected to lots of other things, like live art and performance art and music and film making and so forth, and I rubbed shoulders with lots of fringy people.

In summery, I think that's how I got to where I am. I'm constantly going through a process, a subtle process, it may not be discernable to everybody, of re-thinking and re-inventing what I'm doing. I'm actually in the process of doing that now, so although you're introduction is quite correct, I wouldn't really say I'm a Weimar Cabaret performer anymore. I think the term is 'burlesque' but that's one of those terms that's not really very useful anymore

because it's packed with so many associations that I don't really associate with what I do, so I'm just back to calling myself a 'cabaret performer'. As I said, the queer part wasn't an overtly political act; I'm not trying to change the world. I leave that to David.

DH: I'm doing what I can, but I can't do it on my own... It is an interesting question to be asked, why we're doing what were doing at this moment in time. I'd say it is due to circumstances. After I'd killed off the Divine David, I didn't perform for six years, but when I got back into performance in about 2006 I kept it simple. It's me, it's new, and I feel I've gone back more into the realm of cabaret and I'm enjoying producing the shows and inviting other performers to be involved. I think that's part of me getting old, and I think it's important that we as a community try to encourage young people to express themselves. I think there are a lot of distractions in modern day life, the Internet for example, and we can all get addicted to it and allow ourselves to become passive and receive entertainment without really participating in it. When I perform, I do regard it as a collaboration between me and the audience, and I think that's very important. What's also important is a place for young people, or any performers really, to be a bit workshoppy or experimental, you know, not feel that you constantly have to be producing slick routines. It's really important to have somewhere where you think, 'Well, let's try it and we'll find out the hard way, what are its strengths and what are its weaknesses.' It helps development. I'm very lucky because my audience seems to have grasped that, which means I am fortunate to be able to make mistakes.

SF: I think we'll return to all of this, but in that break what drew you back to it, after six years away?

DH: I was in Italy with just a pay-as-you-go phone. Someone had managed to get my mobile number and they were connected with Chris Morris and they said that he wanted me to audition for a new TV series they were doing [*Nathan Barley*]. Because it was him I thought, 'Well, this will get me out of Italy.' He said, 'Can you be in London next Thursday?' and I said, 'Well, I'm

actually in Italy,' and he said, 'OK, you can come the Thursday after,' and I said, 'No I'll be there!' And I met him and we went for a coffee and then there was the whole process of audition... but it was down to Chris really that I got back in.

Then I thought, 'Now I've done this television production, I may as well go back on to the stage.' I worked with Sarah Frankcom at the Royal Exchange theatre in Manchester on a one-night-only show [*David Hoyle's SOS*] to ease myself back into it. The studio contained about 100 people, but as luck would have it, there were some quite influential people there that night who had come up from London, so that show transferred to the Soho Theatre, and the next minute it was at the Opera House. It all happened very quickly now I'm very happy at the Vauxhall Tavern, but I'm also having everything filmed because I would like to get back on the television, I think. I recently made a film, an Avante Garde Alliance production, all about people working together collectively; again that's been an experience.

SF: Ok, Julie?

H: Ever since I can remember I've liked performing, I'd get my friends together and I'd say, 'Come on, let's do a show,' and they were like, 'Why?' 'Because I want to boss you around!' I wanted to do a drama course when I was at school but I never quite had the patience so I joined the army, as Steven mentioned. I got into a desperate state of drugs, sex, alcohol, 'wooo everything's amazing' and then woke up and I needed some direction. So from one extreme to the other I threw myself into that. So I was in the army for two years and I was Private Hole, as my real surname is Hole. People think I'm making up, but it's completely true. I was actually Private Hole!

DH: Did anyone laugh at it?

H: They didn't because when people asked me what my name was I'd say 'Private Arse', and they'd go, 'Ahh, you've got a sense of humour.' They left me alone once they realised they couldn't get to me.

DH: You beat them to it.

H: But there was something in the back of my head in the army that said, 'You're a creative, this isn't who you are.' So I came out of the army, I did a degree in photography in Blackpool. I wanted to be an artist but express my ideas through photography. Unfortunately they tried to push me into a box and say, 'Be a commercial photographer; art is wrong!' So I left, I went on a brief visit to Vienna and when I was drunk someone suggested I move there and I went, 'Yeah, ok!' just on a whim. I had no partner, no money, no nothing. But it was interesting. Initially I'd show galleries my stuff but they found it a bit rude and a bit odd.

While I was living in Vienna, I was visiting London every now and again. I'd go out on the gay scene and see the same tired old drag that had been going since the year dot – bless them, they've got their place but you know, the waxed eyebrows, the diamante sequins, the 'I'm lip synching to Shirley Bassey'... How hard is it to lip sync? You learn a song and go, 'la de da de la.' I just kept seeing this and as my art was all about my sexuality and gender and I was playing with these different ideas I thought, 'Well, I can do that.' People said, 'You can't, you're a woman!' And I said, 'Well, why not?'

I didn't want to be a drag *king*, I find that quite restrictive. I thought, actually I want to look at what drag queens have done and take that back to the female body. I felt that feminism gave women many fabulous things, but at the same time it lost its glamour, whereas drag is a celebration of an absolute insane glamour – not femininity, but glamour. I wanted to take it back to the female body and mix it up a little bit. Even when I'm in drag I still look like a woman, I've got woman's breast and I don't strap anything down. I've still got hands and if I put my voice down like this, it confuses people – usually the guys who like transvestites, the straight guys. I just like to throw them a little bit, it's quite entertaining! A lot of people don't see past the end of their nose and I like questioning that. Overall I'd say what I'm trying to do is entertain – hopefully it's entertaining! – but for me it's also political. I like the idea of people not

knowing. People do grab my bits or grab, you know, *down there*, because they don't know and as much as it's annoying and I end up punching them, it's actually questioning gender and their own gender to a degree, what is black and white – 'It's wearing a wig and blusher so it has to be a drag queen, because that's all I know.' I try to say, 'Do you have to be black and white in gender, in sexuality, in *anything*? It's all a big hot mess.'

I started performing in Vienna, doing my 'tranny with a fanny' routine in lots of funky house clubs – which I hated. But I got bored with Vienna, I couldn't progress, so I came back to London, even though I knew I'd have to start again at the bottom. Nobody knew me; people still don't know who the Hell I am, but I'm still in there, having to go on tours. I suppose there is sexism in the industry because unfortunately, if you're not a burlesque girl getting your titties out or a very sweet *chanteuse*, it's very hard to try to penetrate certain things. Which is fine. I'm not that angry.

SF: It's funny, you do seem a *little* bit angry...

H: I'm not! That's why I create my own thing, that's why I create my own life now because I realise, 'Well you can just sit there and moan that it's not coming to you, or you can get off your arse and do it yourself.' And yes, a lot of the time it's not for the money, it's for the love of it, but you hope eventually it will pay off.

DL: Mostly for the love of it.

SF: I think there's something interesting that you all touched on, which is, a sense of questioning. Would you say that's a key part of what you do?

DL: That's interesting what you were talking about, Julie, because when I was still in Brisbane, I did my first stage role – Frank in *The Rocky Horror Show*. I was pretty much in at the deep end – I'd never performed on stage in my life and suddenly I was the lead! It was a student production, but then I did some tranny roles as well. I did Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

and because I looked pretty in a dress and am six foot one, I looked like a good drag queen, so people started saying, 'You should go into drag!' Brisbane drag was probably ten times more retrogressive than anything you would see here, I mean it was pretty rough in the 1990s, there was a real undercurrent of genuine misogyny and I just thought, 'I don't want anything to do with this!' To me, that's what drag was. There was no Jonny Woo back then, none of that out-drag stuff that we have now in London. So I deliberately distanced myself from the whole thing.

None-the-less, I like the idea of making people question things a little bit, so I created a persona who was very much a male character but who was very androgynous, and who would say and do things you wouldn't necessarily expect. So that was my little bit of resistance. But that original character is a lot more elaborate than what you see now, partly because I just got to the point where I hated putting make-up on – after a while it just becomes a rod for your own back and I thought, 'I can't be arsed!'

DH: It takes me longer to take my make-up off than put it on.

DL: We should send you down Selfridges! I think it's really interesting the way audiences project a fantasy onto you, wanting you to be a certain thing. They want you to be a drag queen and they're really surprised if you don't have a cock and they can't quite compute that, and that in itself is a slightly political gesture. To confuse someone can be political, I think. And, David, when I first saw you on telly many years ago, didn't you make a comment about how you were doing anti-drag, it was so cartoonish?

DH: Well yes, a lot of drag is not misogynistic, it's chauvinistic really, it's demonstrating that, as far as they're concerned, there has been absolutely no progress and that women must always be decorative and aren't as intelligent as people with cocks. And it just needed exploding, really. Similar to you, Julie, I don't pretend to have breasts and I don't pretend to have a vagina, but that doesn't stop me feeling the hysterical glamour, it doesn't stop me from using my face like a canvas and trying to make the most of my eyes and

ultimately making myself look like I've just gone through the windscreen of a car.

Gender doesn't mean anything to me, absolutely nothing. I think as human beings we can really only be a consciousness and a collection of cells, how our genitals form does not dictate how we think and feel, that's what I believe. We keep going on about masculine and feminine, but to me that's artificial and it polarises things. Why try to define yourself within these moribund ways of describing a person. We should be going away from it.

SF: I just thought of a piece that I saw about you on YouTube. I think you're in Manchester, probably as the Divine David, and you asked a passing drag queen (there can't be many places in the country where that happens!) about the end of gender and there was a beautiful moment where the drag queen just went, 'I've got to go now!'

DH: Nathan Evans filmed that about a year ago and I remember the moment you're referring to because it showed that some people are very uncomfortable thinking outside the box. But I can't define myself with these scraps of nonsense.

DL: I remember when I was researching the talk I did here on the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld who had the intense German requirement to classify everything but was honest enough to accept that there were all sorts of things so he came up with 64 genders. Ah, yes, David you are Number 35!

DH: I think they've got it up to 70 odd now, but they're going to do the statistics.

H: But it's still all pigeon holes, isn't it?

DL: And also it changes over the course of a lifespan; it changes over the course of a day; it changes depending how many wines I've had, to be honest.

DH: Yes, well I can relate to that, can't wait for the first one.

DL: Calling the break early...

SF: Well formally I think that's what queerness is and I'm interested in the way that you make your work and what you were saying at the beginning, Dusty, about there being a constant moment of change and just being ahead, not because it gives you a market but because it steps with your work, keeping just that little bit beyond what's thinkable, what's conceivable.

DL: I think that's a natural developmental process and in my case it wasn't always conscious. The starting point for the Dusty Limits character, the things I wouldn't compromise on, were my sexual orientation, which was simply not going to be something I would lie about because I couldn't see the point and it seems artistically untrue, and I wanted to have an element of satire. I didn't want to ever end up in a sentimental posture. From there, the developmental process has just happened as the world around me has changed. It's almost like the red queen running constantly in order to stay in the same place – you have to be constantly changing in order not to fall behind. How much of that is conscious I don't know, though. It's not like the way that someone like David Bowie reinvented himself, very consciously and very artistically.

SF: Let's talk about how you get to make your work, that's intriguing.

I think the manifestations of your respective work are quite diverse and yet foundations are very close. What kind of processes do you go through? When you get an idea for a show, how do you work it out? How do you decide which hair you're going to do it with? How do you decide which song you might choose? How do you decide which music you'll do? How do you get to those?

DL: In my case, again it seems to happen the other way round, which is I'll be listening to a song or I'll be going through some music and I'll go, 'Oh I like that, I'll do that,' and then I'll go, 'Oh shit, I've to come up with something for this haven't I because I really don't have any idea what I'm doing!' Or I'll get a

call from the venue up the road who've thought 'We've lost an act, Dusty will do it, he only lives five minutes away and we'll give him a free drink,' and I'll just panic and go, 'Well what can I do? What's in my wardrobe? What's in my larder of tricks? What can I cook out of this?' And I end up doing something ludicrous involving lots of face painting and simulated drug use and falling over, but again it seems to come from somewhere outside, rather than this kind of desperate need to actualise an idea that's in my head.

What generally happens is that something will occur to me when I'm in the middle of performing. For example, one of the acts I that I do all the time is *Losing my Mind*, where I sing it to a bottle of vodka and then get really drunk and blackout – and that came to me on stage, I was actually singing the song completely normally and then onstage thought 'that's funny' and just grabbed a bottle, and the bit grew from there. *Jonny*, the one where I fuck the chair, is another where again I was singing the song quite straight, as it were, and then it just developed. Having an audience in front of you, looking up at you expecting something, is a great impetus to sudden acts of creativity.

DH: I suppose that's where it comes back to expectations.

H: I tend to have lots of little ideas, which I'll write down or put into a song. I like having my finger in lots of pies, rather than just being one thing, so I'm making a film at the moment – I make video art, performance art. It all has to be pushed out, but sometimes something will sit there for years before I return to it, something I might have thought was nonsense at the time.

I feel I've got so much more to do, though. I'm a child really – I've only been performing in this guise for eight years now. I'm still a baby. I have so much more I want to do in terms of different forms. I hate the idea that if this is what you do, this is *all* you do. We'll put you in a box and that's all you are, you're a singer, you're an actor, you're a dancer, whatever, that's all you do. Why can't everything just be a bit vague, a bit grey, a bit pick and choose? I just like the idea that I do all these different things. I'm a mistress of all trades, jack of none, yet I don't have a particular skill. For me, that's great if that's what you

want to do, you're very focused and very concentrated, but I just go, urrrgh, here's a pint of bitter, let's just see where it lands – if it's there or there, if it's underground, if it's accessible or not accessible, who cares? Just do it, just get out.

DH: I have a very personal stand because for some of us, if we don't express ourselves and perform, then probably insanity is the only alternative. I'm very into the cathartic nature of art and it's certainly helped me a lot.

Going back to the original question, I have come to the conclusion that I'm a very emotional person and I draw on how I feel emotionally, try to contextualise myself within a very cruel capitalist system and how that makes me feel. I can be frighteningly open and I think I am quite incontinent in that way. I think we're meant to be control freaks, which I abhor. In fact I'm thinking of designing a T-shirt that says 'Control freaks, on behalf of humanity, please kill yourselves as some of us just want to love and live' – that's my moto for today.

DL: But please kill yourselves in an organised fashion, is that it?

SF: From your responses, I get the impression there's a mass of ideas that you can select from.

DH: Personal and political.

DL: I think if, as Julie does, you have fingers in many pies, things come to you because of this random process, if you don't limit yourself to one modality. Everyone has a main modality, the one they work most in – I'm more to do with how things sound whereas I think some people are more concerned with how they look, or are more kinaesthetic – but everyone has all of them and if you don't limit yourself to one, or to one persona or idea of who you are, then things do make connections almost in an organic way that you don't have to do anything about. You don't have to catalyze, it just happens and all of a sudden you find yourself thinking, 'Oh yeah, if I do this song in the style of that

person, or if I do this routine making fun of that...' You know, it's that flash of inspiration that comes sometimes if you leave things and give them a little bit of space but keep yourself surrounded by stimuli. I think that's crucial.

SF: And do the rest of you change stuff when you step on stage? Do you think, 'Tonight I feel like doing *this*'?

H: Absolutely.

DH: Why I enjoy performing is that I don't know myself which way it's going to go, so there's always that golden opportunity of a complete car crash because a lot of it is spontaneous and improvised. Sometimes I'll be booked to perform and they'll say, 'Well what will you be doing?' and I'll say, 'Well, I never know what I'm going to say really.' Obviously there'll be some things ticking away, but that whole idea of performance being 'in five minutes I do this and then I go upstage left, then I turn...' I mean they could just train dogs – they used to do it with budgerigars.

DL: That's one of the things about performing in cabaret – the essential feature of the art form is that the audience are there and you acknowledge them and they acknowledge you and there's a back-and-forth. It's not like a theatre where they plunge the audience into darkness, effectively pretend they're not there and expect them to sit there obediently and just look and not rustle their sweet papers. In cabaret, the whole point is that you are in the room with those people and then as soon as that back-and-forth starts, stuff happens. It's like stand up comedians who do ad-libs, it's the same basic principle – you see someone in a funny hat and something happens or someone knocks their drink over and it just snowballs from there.

H: I used to be a control freak but I found I was angry with myself because I'd practice and practice until I hated it. I'd beat myself up about it. And then I started to let go and I'm much more confident now. If I do mess up I can bounce off it a lot easier. I did a show on Friday in an art gallery for an

amazing painter called John Lee Bird, he's done a lot of portraits of lots of freaks. I think he's done you, Dusty, hasn't he?

DL: I'm under Florence from Florence and the Machine.

H: He asks a lot of people to come and perform and I literally had no idea what I was going to do. I took along songs I knew I'd be asked for but I got there and there were big bands on before me and I thought, 'Well, actually, maybe I could try something else.' So I just sat on a stool and made everyone sit on the floor around me because I didn't like the idea of the separation – I'm here, you're there. I said, 'Let's all come together, let's all interact together, have fun with it.' It was a really weird space, different from a boozy club but you could still get in with people and have fun with it and play with it, and the audience often give you that energy to kind of pull yourself up a little bit.

DL: It terrifies stage managers, though, when you're a cabaret performer and you go to do a gig in a big venue and they know that this whole thing is costing a fortune and they say, 'Can you do your number?' and you just walk through it, because you're not going to do it, because there's no audience, there's no point. And they go, 'What? We've flown you from London and that's what you're doing?' but until you've got the energy of the exchange with the audience, you genuinely can't do it in any kind of convincing or passionate way. It creates fear in SMs everywhere when you start wandering off into the orchestra pit.

DH: It was the same in television actually. When I was adamant that there would be no scripts or anything like that, they were always very quick to tell me how much it cost per day to hire the studio and they'd ring at one in the morning saying, 'Have you got a script prepared for tomorrow?' 'Well, I didn't have one prepared for today!' In those days all I needed to know was that the red light on top of the camera went on. That was as complicated as it got. I think there's too much forward planning these days. Surely art as an expression is in the moment, so if we keep honing performances then all it shows is that you've got a good memory. How vital is that?

DL: But also it sucks all of the life out of your performance. When I started out, I trained in music theatre singing and people would say, 'Oh, are you going to audition for *Les Mis*, and this and that?' Under no circumstances, because after three weeks I'd kill somebody – those things are so absolutely rigid, you can't change a move or a line, there's a big book where they write down if anyone adlibs, and you get told off by the production company. My friend used to be an SM on *Les Mis*, literally if you change a line or you change a bit of choreography he has to write it down and if you do it too many times you get told off. To me that's absolutely the antithesis of cabaret or art. If that was my future, I'd study to be a vet or something at this point.

SF: If you had to encapsulate what you build and communicate politically or meaningfully through your work, what is it? What do you want people to take away?

DL: Ok, there are a lot of things I'd like to say, very quickly.

The term Weimar or neo-Weimar came up earlier and when I was being called that – because it's not a term I actually applied to myself – what I understood that to mean was a shared sensibility. Between the wars was that there was no censorship because the Kaisership had ended and lots of artists went to Berlin because they could say what they wanted and not get locked up for it, which they couldn't do in most of Europe. And that bred an attitude, a very Berlin attitude, where even if you're being extremely passionate and sincere at the same time you're being ironic. There's always a layer of awareness and irony and a kind of Brechtian thing – that's the only thing that I keep in what I do that I think is consistent. I don't want to be accused of sentimentality. I think sentiment is a cloak for all sorts of stupid and limiting and oppressive ways of thinking about the world.

I don't have much overt politics in my shows, not since I stopped doing KUNST [a regular night at the RVT], for the simple reason that I started to find myself getting a bit preachy, but I also found I wasn't articulating things very clearly. I do it much better in an essay. I've gone from being a sort of

libertarian to being just a libertine, I think. I'm not sure if that's a political choice or not.

DH: Politically we are all living in a, as far as I'm concerned, cruel capitalist system where it is about objectifying each other and seeing each other as consumers or some small cog in a horrific machine. So I'm quite happy to acknowledge that. If we were to have a revolution, I think we've got to get away from the utilitarian and make it a bit more glamorous. What you [Julie/Holestar] were saying about costume – why not? Why, when people think of revolutions, do they usually think of something quite grim? Recently I did a song called *Karl Marx's Flat* and it is depressing, the idea that that ultimately, if you were to go down a socialist road, we would all just end up in concrete cubes with just a bowl and a spoon; there'd be no television, no entertainment, nothing. The only thing that can happen to you is you might break a bowl or lose the spoon and then you have to go in front of the committee and explain what happened and hope that they will give you a replacement.

I'm quite happy as I hurtle towards my fifties to say that I think we've got masculine and feminine, and left wing and right wing, we always seem to need poles. I am fortunate enough to know that I am 47 but I've managed to live without a mansion, I managed to live without a Rolls Royce. I was offered what, to some people, would have been an amazing deal by Channel 4 at one stage and I said no and I'm very proud of that decision. I think it kept me alive because one of the reasons I killed Divine David was, not only did I feel I'd done everything on stage bar killing myself, but the way I was living and the people that I seemed to have attracted... Even now I can say I am the patron saint of paranoid schizophrenia. I spend quite a lot of my day getting messages, emails, and I take that part of the job quite seriously and I'm very flattered that people feel that they can tell me anything. So when you do an entertainment, there is a knock-on effect and people see something in what you're doing and the joy of it is that they will relate to it and you can end up having some quite interesting, communication.

SF: Certainly I think that there is, in your work, an honesty, a brutal openness that enables you to draw people in so that you can communicate to them, but at the same time you're not afraid of the critical. I've heard people come up to you and say, 'I really love you, but I really fucking disagree with you' and you take it.

What about you, Julie?

H: I just did an interview and I didn't realise they were filming me and I read it the transcript on their website and I was just ranting about women! It's interesting that I started thinking feminism is a lot of old shit, whereas now that it's almost negative to be a feminist and I have become one. I did my thesis on celebrity culture and how it alienates and how it has come to influence popular culture, and how people judge and appear to themselves. With feminism I like the idea that you can be who you want and whether you have a big nose, a fat arse, or no tits, you've got to learn to love yourself. There's a girl who lives near me, she's got these massive fake tits and bleach blonde hair and big lips and she scares me. And I think, 'Does she love herself? Does she even know who she is? Has anyone sat her down and said, 'Let's just talk, let's just talk about you.' She's so wrapped up in this physical idea of 'Ok, Jordon: she's famous and she's popular and she's rich – I'll look like that and I'll be the same.' But what about *you*? What about you loving yourself and loving other people around you? And there's a big thing about women being like spies and women hating each other, criticising each other. These celebrity magazines are full of women going, 'She's got cellulite, she's fat, she's doing this, she's losing weight, she's not a got a boyfriend...' Stop it!

DH: I feel that about gay men, actually. Things that should be about solidarity and when you're in the company of another gay person you should always acknowledge. People talk about 'post feminism' – how ridiculous is that? And who wouldn't be a feminist? I think it's really important that they do support each other I really do, but again I could go on about young people and they don't support each other because they take so much for granted. I understand the idea of a young person thinking they've just been beamed from outer

space but if you are a member of the LGBT community, believe it or not there is actually a history and some of us might not have been as fortunate.

I do think we should, as you say, accept ourselves. It's taken me a lifetime to get my head round that whole idea of loving yourself. A lot of my work in the past was so nihilistic – shooting up on stage and all those sorts of things. It was all about 'I don't give a shit whether I'm alive or dead' and dressing up and making an entertainment out of it. So yes, things have changed.

Questions from the floor:

SF: Shall we get to the second bit of tonight's event, which is a questions from the floor. Has anyone got a burning question that they want to kick off with?

Catherine McNamara (CSSD): It's not burning, but I'll be brave enough to ask the first question. It's about young people, because a couple of you were talking about that and about how we possibly could and should nurture young people within the community. I'm right behind you on that one but an interesting dilemma for me is that often the venues where queer performance happens are the boozy nights that don't allow young people in. It's not really question but more asking what we can do.

DH: To get an arena?

AM1: To nurture young people.

DH: As long as you're old enough to visit licensed premises, wherever I'm on you know, there will be some people, I suppose, younger than eighteen.

I don't know whether I can get my hands on them really, but I've enjoyed working with the Albert Kennedy Trust in Manchester. I've done two projects with them now and their young people, members of the LGBT community who are homeless, and personally that's been very satisfying to do. It's great being a performer but I still think, probably because I've been doing it a long time,

there has to be more to it than performing, than the applause. It's all very nice, so I do feel given the opportunity I will try to pay back or do something. But I see what you're saying, everything does seem to centre around licensed premises.

DL: It's a logistical problem really, isn't it? It's a question of how you get performance out to people, the kind of performance that really can only take place in those kinds of boozy, rowdy intimate spaces because it's part of the nature of the performance.

H: I'm currently making a film because I saw the need to get this out there. We're in our own little bubble, almost because we can be who we want and do what we want, and I kept thinking of little people in a little isolated village who've got no gay scene, no concept of 'am I gay, am I straight, am I queer, what am I?' while all this mad crazy nonsense is going on, especially in the East of London. Everything's blurred and everything's grey rather than black or white. A few of us have done Glastonbury the last few years as part of Download and we go as this bunch of trannies running around in the discothèque making lots of noise and upsetting people. It's hilarious but by the end of it, people get it. That's when we ask them to come in and we dance with them and jump on stage and I kept saying, 'Why's no-one filming? Why's no-one documenting this?' It's part of history, a culture. We've got no money – I'm sort of waiting for funding, hoping the Heritage Lottery Fund will get behind us because we're trying to preserve British queer history – but we're making this film and we're following some of the characters. It's like *Paris is Burning*. I saw that American culture had *Paris is Burning* and they had Woodstock, they had Squeezebox, they have all these films about American queer, alternative drag culture; in UK culture we have a few of these little, little things but they are very small fringe films that get shown at a few little festivals and disappear. I want to make something that celebrates that this person's trans, this person's gay, this person's queer, that person just likes to dress up... who cares? Throw it open! And here's a film that hopefully some young queer, curious person says, 'Ah, that's me, I can relate to that,' because, like you

say, we don't know how to access these people. I always think film and TV are the easiest mediums to reach people.

DL: I think actually, you've just made me think of something. I'm 38 years old – I know, no stop! – It's a slightly generational thing but it doesn't occur to me to film my shows because to me that makes no sense. It's cabaret, why would I film it? But even performers who are ten years younger than I am film *everything* and it's on YouTube the next day, and again that's just because that's what you do and it's totally taken for granted that's what you do. I think old warhorses like me and David are possibly too old to jump on that Internet band wagon but there are younger performers who are doing this stuff and who are doing what Julie's talking about. They do get out there and disseminate it. I'm just really slack at things like that because I'm a complete technophobe.

H: That's why I put it all in a film, because it's tangible.

DH: I decided to embrace digital technology. When I was working as Divine David, if anybody was filming a show, wherever it was, it didn't matter, I would remove the camera and ask them to go because in those days I was thinking that the performance was an ephemeral experience that they were all privy to and rather than record it and have a film that you can look at to jog your memory, it appealed to me to have sort of a happening, so that everybody that was there would remember. I mean we all remember things in a very personal way, very different way, it's all coloured by our experiences. But then when you see a forest of mobile phones, you can't fight that and it becomes part of it. Now, I've let go of everything. I don't watch myself on YouTube because invariably it'll be a part of your show that is taken out of context and isolated, so it's not the same as a live experience. But yes, I have made a film and I do want to do more television.

DL: That does solve our logistical difficulty, which is they can watch it.

H: Yes, it's good if people can access the ideas and the form, but maybe it's sad if they can't be there.

DL: There is surely scope for doing some of this stuff in spaces that are accessible to people of all ages. I should know this because I'm a Westminster licensee.

DH: Are you? Oh wow, how come you do that?

DL: It's a long story! But there are ways it could be done, for 16 and 17 year olds. Definitely you could.

CM: The Albert Kennedy Trust project is a really clear way to hook into their world rather than finding a way for them to hook into yours.

DH: Well it's to do with giving people strength. What I was doing the last time I worked with young people was encouraging them to see that unity is strength and that collectively they could start to make demands. We're going through a very interesting period in subsidised theatre and it's very, very important, more important than it ever has been, that there is a LGBT presence in all sorts of theatre, because there are a lot of politics at work with that. It's that word we've all heard so many times – 'empowerment'. I think the motivation for it is that I regard myself as a member of the mental health community. I was actually treated for being a homosexual at the age of 14. I'll never get over it. If I'm feeling at a low ebb, I have to remember that I was born into a world where adults would do that to a young person on the absolute threshold of life.

So that's why my work is very important to me, and why I think it does resonate with other people from perhaps an oppressive or religious background; it shows the explosive potential of performance. Going back to how we can create an arena, it's a fantastic question. I don't know what you do? Hire a marquee?

DL: This may sound a little bit left field but back in Australia, you had things called Blue Light Discos, which were run by the police. They had blue lights on their cars and it was for teenage kids up to 17. No alcohol would be served, obviously, so you'd get completely hammered before you went to them, but in fact you look back and you realise that was the whole point. The strategy wasn't to stop kids drinking, it was to get kids drunk and then contained in a place where police could actually make sure nobody did anything stupid or got hurt rather than dropping stones off motorway bridges onto passing cars. I don't know how we adapt that model, but there actually is the potential to do something like that, have an evening of performance – quite challenging, interesting performance – and just make sure people take their methadone before they turn up!

DH: From your perspective, why would you have to wait until you were a so-called adult or until you're slick and proficient, before you can express yourself and publicly say what it is that you feel? I think what you're saying is very, very important, so how do we do that?

SF: Certainly the impulse and question is very important. I know Cathy is doing a lot of work with Trans Youth Arts on this. We can critique gay youth, but we need to educate them too. But it's hard to find the space to do that. You might have Gay History Month, but noone knows it. I've sat with a young gay people and said, 'What's gay history?' and they've said, 'The Greeks?'

H: That's better than saying Kylie, isn't it?

DL: That's not a bad answer.

SF: It's easy for us to say, 'You should know more,' but how? It's a crucial question.

CM: Well I'm about to start an intergenerational project with LGBT young people and old people. I might be coming your way. But a couple of older

people are saying 'young people don't care about older people, it'll be one way traffic.' There's an assumption that young people are off the line.

DH: I think some of the things that I say are polemical, and then it can appear like a concrete statement even though I've probably said it to get a reaction. But I do think that there should be a solution to the problem that you've posed, I really do.

SF: Ok, let's move on to another question.

Audience Member 2: I'm very much in the early stages of my gender career, if you want to call it that, and the work I'm trying to do is looking at relationships between gender and politics and the idea of semiotics, how we're asked to adhere to our genders at numerous points in our daily routine. You've all made quite interesting points about different ways in which we can conform to our gender and how we then have to explain our gender, and I think the question I really want to ask is how do you think we can move forward, especially within the ideas of femininity? For example, if we said you're either trans, a very pretty feminine person, or burlesque, and there's no middle ground? I think many modern women are crossing between the genders, but not necessarily in a sexual way; they're doing it perhaps through their personality. So how do you think we can move forwards in terms of liberalising our gender classifications?

DH: First of all we have to develop confidence within ourselves so that whatever it is we're presenting, we truly believe. We're still living in very dark days and this is why, when we were talking about post-feminism and it doesn't matter if you're gay and all the rest of it, it's pretty nonsensical really. In general, someone who is masculine or is assumed to be masculine is still worth more points than a gay man who might appear feminine. We are still slaves to the idea of the masculine male, and it does disturb me that young people are still being given this as something to aim for, when it is about self acceptance and it is about learning to love yourself.

DL: I also think that a point you've touched on a few times – this idea of solidarity and collective responsibility – is really important. I hear the buzz of lots of people saying 'LGBTQ' is a terrible bit of cheap journalism. Grow up! It's not that long an acronym. You can cope with five letters you cheap hack!

Secondly, of course individual sub-communities do fragment because in fact gay men who like to go to the gym eventually realise they have nothing in common with their lesbian sister who lives in Stoke Newington and owns a cat; once you start defining yourself as a human being, one of sixty four thousand million genders possibly, you start to see why these distinctions are so silly. At the risk of sounding like tedious old Weimar historian, what you learn from the Weimar period is that you could be very out and gay and there were lots of gay clubs... it was actually a trend. There are songs from that period actually making fun of the idea of everyone being so hermaphroditic and gender fluid. This is 1926, through 30-something! It was such a prevalent trend, people actually felt they were able to take the piss out of it in songs. And then ten years later they were being rounded up in gas chambers. It's extraordinary. No minority should ever think that everything's ok because it doesn't take long before someone pulls the plug on your freedom.

What I would drive home to people is the importance of solidarity. You actually do have power collectively and as soon as you start deciding you are in a minority – say 'queers between 25 and 40 who watch Star Trek' – you might as well throw in the towel.

AM2: So perhaps don't be complacent?

DL: Don't get comfortable. Remember the things you have in common with people are the important things, not the things that make you different – much as I think celebrating difference is important. I don't expect some kind of monolithic, Stalinist bloc, but I think it's really important that we are reminded that we have very little power individually.

DH: It's interesting that the avant-garde scene was at its strongest during the Weimar years in terms of cabaret and performance, and that painting was at its strongest before the First World War, and that both finished with a major global war where we're all fighting each other.

DL: Always a massive backlash.

DH: Yes, I think there's a connection. I think that through the avant-garde we can liberate ourselves and each other, and it is very interesting that when the avant-garde gets very strong, almost immediately there is a major international military armament manifestation. This is why history is very important because we can learn as much from history as we can from psychoanalysis and therapy. The answers are there. It's about patterns, in our personal life, it's about patterns in behaviour.

Again, I'm not knocking young people but there's a wonderful line in the new play by Jonathan Harvey, *Canary*, there's a character called Toby who is a young person and he refers to HIV and Aids as 'an old man's disease that means nothing to me'. He's talking to a older person, probably somebody my age who has been a gay activist, has been involved in supporting lesbian and gay rights, etc. They've got a fantastic confidence that I applaud, a confidence that wasn't allowed us. I was an out gay child and the adults found that so offensive they had to destroy me. What can't be dominated in some people has to be destroyed, and I want to be very mindful of that.

H: I think the idea of femininity needs to be shaken up. Just as the gay media is almost fascist – all the magazines say 'this is what you should aspire to be' – it's the same with women's magazines. And even straight men are being objectified now.

Everything's airbrushed, and everyone looks a certain way. Even the Bears, who are supposed to be the anti all that, have created their own little tight knit group with its own rules – you've got to be overweight, the beard has to be this long...

DL: You have to be this degree of hairy...

DH: If you talk to Fred Bear about Bearlesque – a dance troupe of Bears – and how the attitudes within their own community have now completely changed, they've gone down that usual ditch of 'masculine is good'. It's a bit like George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: masculine is good, it's all we know, it is the archetype, the mould that we should all be fitting ourselves into. Garbage!

H: I get that also from the lesbian community. Lesbian media is not interested in me at all because I don't say I'm a lesbian, I say I'm 'queer' – in gender, my sexuality, everything, I'm queer.

DH: You've got make-up on. You've let everybody down!

DL: You've let down both sides at once!

H: The media, especially lesbian news, politicise their sexuality, which is fine, which is great, but because I come on and go, 'Woo! Lets have a party' they recoil and say, 'No no, no!' I've got a little bit of glitter on today, but generally, day to day, I'm in jeans and T-shirt. I'm crap, so I conform in that sense, to the day to day. I'm a conforming lesbian, yes, I'm getting taxed and I'm getting married, oh great. But as a woman, as a gay whatever I am, I don't want to have to conform to someone's idea of who I should be. My girlfriend and I go to gay clubs, lesbian clubs, and we're scared. We feel we don't belong.

DL: It's a sad truth but I think human brains work in binaries. Large groups of human beings tend to want everyone to conform because of a fear of difference, but also if you've been the victim of that kind of oppression, you tend to find the next smallest person to take it out on. Bullies were always bullied themselves, and I think the gay bisexual transgender queer, intersex – see how hard was that? – community can be as guilty of that as anyone else, of passing on their own oppression, just finding someone smaller to pick on.

SF: Just one more question over here and then we're out of time I'm afraid.

Audience Member 3: I'm quite interested in rejected or undetected irony, especially in cabaret performance. I think another prominent queer performance artist, Ursula Martinez, recently created a show called *My Stories Your Emails* which is entirely about all the people who saw her extremely ironic burlesque act broadcast on the Internet and then reacted in a way that I feel rejected her irony and her ironic statement. I wanted to know if any of you have ever encountered that in your performance.

DL: No, I've never been rejected – all the time! It's funny that you mentioned YouTube because one of the reasons I have an aversion to having things filmed, even though I understand it's the way forward, is because you lose so much visual detail and, especially in British culture, the degree between sincere and ironic is tiny, whereas in many other cultures it's much broader. When you're being sarcastic in the US, you're being *sarcastic* and that's how you signify that it's a social thing, whereas in this country there's a pride, a perverse pride, taken in making yourself slightly unreadable. I've done lots of things and said lots of things where I've got in big trouble from people and I was just very grateful they weren't on the Internet for millions of people to see. As I said earlier, I constantly strive to create ironies in what I'm doing, even ironising my own impulse to ironise, questioning why I feel this need to be slightly insincere. So you find yourself in a sort of quagmire of an elliptic process – do I actually mean what I'm saying? I can't even remember what it means to me what I'm saying. And I think that has a political consequence because actually sometimes you need to be able to make a completely unequivocal statement. But I can't make an unequivocal statement, or maybe I can, or maybe I can't, I don't know.

H: I've got a song called *NyLon Woman*, which is just pop nonsense, and we needed to make a video very quickly. We've got no budget, so what do we do? I was looking at what people were writing in the media about Chatroulette, the zeitgeist, and I thought, 'Right, let's jump on that!' I went out

brought myself a webcam and sat in front of Chatroulette, in drag, for five days. Chatroulette, if you don't know, people wank on the Internet and you don't know who you're going to chat to and impregnate. Mostly it's bankers, it's hilarious, it's a social experiment, it's fascinating. I had four different screens so they had me and their reactions. It was more about their reaction than anything and some people were amazing. People were really lovely, they were like, 'Where you been?' and I was like, 'Oh, I met some tranny from America.' And of course there were a lot of people going, 'You fag, you fag, you tranny!' and I just thought, 'I'll take it, you know, it's fine, I'm used to it, I'm used to rejection.'

The weirdest thing about all of the negative criticism was that it was girls doing it. I felt more offended when the women were going, 'You fucking nah nah.' The men do it en masse. Actually it's because they wanted to fuck me, but obviously they wouldn't say that in front of their friends. The thing I found really quite peculiar was these two guys, and I don't know where they were from, who sat there looking at me and they said, 'Are you a man or a woman?' and I sort of sat there – the whole point was that I was supposed to be looked at – and smiled. They went, 'If you're a woman, where's your Hijab?' Call me a fag, call me whatever you want, but that shocked me.

DL: But by indication, I believe if you are a drag queen, that's fine. You don't even wear a scarf at all. That's bonkers.

H: But at the same time, it's the Internet that's done that. You can get that backwards and forwards from people, which didn't exist before.

SF: From watching your video, one of the things I found fascinating is the things that you did – when someone did something, you did it back to them, when they smiled, you smiled back, so you mirrored a lot of them and observed a lot of their anxieties.

H: I was actually credited in an outtake selection. I was going to do a compilation of all the negative comments, but I thought, well actually I don't need to do that because that's just a negative vibe around the world.

DL: And it's not representative as well.

H: No let's just have the fun ones. The funniest one was when a guy texted me as soon as he saw me. If you watch the video on YouTube, he literally sees me and jumps up and takes his pants off and I'm like, 'Oh my God!' Fascinating! Chatroulette – fascinating!

SF: So, David, have people ever got you wrong?

DH: Every time I open my mouth, I hope.

DL: You hope?

DH: Yes, because if at first you misunderstand something, then you are motivated to understand it; so the person who might have thought what I was saying was wrong, hopefully in time will ask themselves why that resonated in that particular way, and why therefore I was out of order.

But going back to what we were saying before, sometimes if there is a bit of polemic thrown into the mix, if you look like you're coming from a fixed point then, yes, people are going to react towards that. So in a way I don't mind, I think some of the things I say are deliberately ambiguous because that's to do with the freedom of speech and the right to say anything really. We were talking about words and language and all the rest of it, and what a word is and the way it sounds that we're familiar with, and all these implications and connotations, and all the dominoes are falling, not necessarily in the right direction.

DL: Sebastian Horsley said a great thing. He's famous for coming out with outrageous statements. He said, 'Isn't the whole point that we are free to

express ourselves? Well why shouldn't I be able to say outrageous things?' not addressing whether or not he was letting the recipient of the message know whether he really meant it or not. And of course it isn't clear whether he actually means what he is saying. Then he said the most wonderful thing, he said, 'And if they don't like it, they can suck my Nazi cock,' which I think is just genius.

DH: It's adding insult to injury.

DL: It is, it really is, but it's also saying, 'See, I am now demonstrating how I can express myself, and that's one of the things that living in a culture that values freedom of speech is supposed to uphold.' I think that that the problem with giving a unequivocal message is that you can then end up committing yourself to something and I think that admitting that human beings change their minds all the time is also quite a good thing.

One of the reasons I got so interested in cabaret again happened when I moved to this country from Australia: we thought of Tony Blair as the saviour of the world – and I do think the Labour party did a lot of great stuff for LGBTQ people – but so much of what they did was just bare-faced lying. He was so very sincere and I remember watching an interview and thinking, 'I can't believe a single word that comes out of your mouth! In some ways words have now been devalued as a currency, and if I'm going to use them I'm going to use them in an equivocal way because I would like people to not quite ever believe me, rather than believe him and make decisions on that basis, which have been appalling decisions. So, I'm now moving into interpretive mime as my medium.

SF: On Tony Blair, interpretive mime and Nazi cock, I think we should end there. Thanks to tonight's participants, it's been a brilliant hearing you speak. I wish we could go on for hours and hours. Thank you very much.

www.davidhoyle.info

www.davidhoyle.info/theavantgardealliance.htm

www.dustylimits.com

<http://holestar.webs.com/>

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